Food Service Marketing

OCT 1979

What Computers Can Do For You

Tips For More Efficient Wastehandling

Japanese Specialties From Kamehachi Of Tokyo

Four Ways To Tackle Hard Times

KIDS

What keeps them interested– and what's in it for you?

Gene Landrum, president of Pizza Time Theatre, and friend Chuck E. Cheese make sure youthful patrons are kept happy with pizza, games and animated entertainment.

CHAIN EXECUTIVE EDITION

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At Pizza Time Theatre in California, pizza, animation and life-sized hippos all become . . . child's play!

Catering To Kids

They're little now . . . but watch them grow! Kids are important as a market today, and even more important as the market of tomorrow. And sharp operators are catering to them with creativity, craziness, and a pinch of panache.

By Linda Packer

Forty-three years ago this past summer, when Bob Wian was developing a double-deck hamburger for his brand-new Big Boy restaurant, he decided that to make it a "family place" would mean providing good food and comfort for all ages. Specifically, he wanted to make Bob's Big Boy relaxed and enjoyable enough for parents to want to bring their youngsters.

So he made high chairs and booster chairs available at all times. He gave out colored bibs and free baby food. He instituted a monthly comic book called The Adventures of Big Boy, a neighborhood do-gooder who not only taught readers about right and wrong and gave them educational games to play, but also, in his spare time, went to the moon.

In the 43 years since, the chain — now more than 1,050 units through both company-owned stores and the stores of 19 franchise companies — has changed its focus. Instead of appealing to the parents to bring in their kids, they now appeal to the kids to bring in their parents. In addition to the booster chairs and free baby food, they've also instituted placemats for children to color (given out with two or three washable crayons and parental permission); hand puppets and balloons at store openings; children's menus with games on the back; punch cards which, after 10 punches, result in free gifts for children; and an on-going Big Boy Birthday Club.

"We go for a climate of doing more than just promotions," said Roy Raskin, Big Boy's vice president of franchise operations. "And the reports we've had from units that have been doing these things have been excellent. The managers feel the kids those things attract are of an age that influences their parents. And we want very much to please the kids . . . to the satisfaction of their parents."

Pleasing children to the satisfaction of their parents is not a new idea, but it's one that's gaining momentum. The children's market is a strong one today, and the reasons for that are threefold.

First, children are being taken out to eat more often because, as a whole, families are eating out more often. With an increase in the number of two-career households (see "Women", *FSM* June 1979), there is less time to spend together as a family, less time to cook, and more disposable income. People are going out to eat as family units, and in order to keep their trade restaurants are going to have to start appealing to even the littlest members of the group.

Secondly, children themselves are wealthier today then ever before. The reasons for that, psychologists say, range from an absent parent's appeasement of guilt to an earlier tapping of the Good Old American Work Ethic: Children of eight and nine are now mowing more lawns and washing more cars and sitting with more babies. Even in recessionary times, a lot of kids are prospering.

And lastly, it looks as though a great many restaurants are popping up with long-term game plans. The decade of instability for chains — Minnie who's Fried Chicken? — is past, and independents are concentrating on solidifying their markets. And those who have been

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around for several years are discovering that the people who were children when they opened have a habit of becoming adults before they close. And those operations see a delight in growing old together.

The Ground Round has been around for ten years," said Thomas Russo, group vice president of specialty restaurants for the Ground Round's parent company, Howard Johnson. "And ten years ago, an 18-year-old was eight. We want that person to grow up with us. We think that with what we have to offer, he or she can."

What the Ground Round has to offer is peanuts and popcorn and, in lieu of Crackerjack, old movies and silent cartoons shown on giant screens, free vending machines that clink out toys, Bingo the Clown and his magic tricks, a scale that weighs children for "penny-a-pound" promotions, hot fudge sundaes served in plastic take-home baseball caps, a child's menu incorporated onto the regular menu so that the child doesn't feel segregated, and food for every age . . . at the tune of a $3.70 check average per adult or $1.79 per child. But what the company strives for, is to have these things thought of not as separate elements so much as part of a package that caters, successfully, to all age groups. "The Ground Round has the ability to appeal to different age levels and blend it all into the same rooms," Russo said.

And one way in which they do that is to think of children as a market entirely separate from and entirely equal to their parents. "We try to satisfy for them all the things that we satisfy in adults — the needs for food, ambience, quality and entertainment," said Russo. "We think, What do they like to eat? Chicken, hamburgers, franks, fish — we put them on the menu. They like ice cream sundaes — they're on the menu. They have energy and like to move around — we encourage them to go to the

The Ground Round restaurant chain feels one reason that kids are important is, simply, that "they'll grow".

barrels and scoop their own baskets of peanuts. This is not a rigid restaurant. It's relaxed for both children and adults."

The atmosphere may be relaxed; the expansion plan is not, at least not compared to several years ago. The last three years have brought an accelerated clip to the program. Currently the Ground Round chain is over 150 units wide, having opened four this past July and an additional seven in August. The food served is "fun" food — fat hamburgers and barbecued beef on buns, corned beef and roast beef sandwiches, chili, add-ons like French-fried mushrooms, pitchers of drinks. The free peanuts are digested by the basketful, their shells tossed on the floor. The children's menu consists of set food at set prices: fried chicken, hamburger, frankfurter or fish with French fries and beverage for $1.79.

And with the items boxed right in on the regular menu, a child delights in the feeling of inclusion. "I think it's terrible when you ostracize part of your market," Russo emphasized. "It's terrible when you turn around and say 'Here's *your* menu and here's *your* menu and here's *your* menu. Children must be treated as full-fledged citizens. Sure, a by-product of appealing to children is that they'll bring their parents — but a by-product of appealing to parents is that they'll bring their children. And we think the children's market can grow with us, be satisfied as it grows, remember us as a happy place, and think of us as a place to come to as a child, as a young adult, as an adult, and then as a parent."

The Loose Caboose hasn't been around long enough to think of its clientele growing old with it yet. Mostly, the Loose Caboose has been concentrating on marketing its Teenie Weenies and Porter's Popcorn to those kids who have some money to spend.

They, like other fast-food chains, appeal more directly to the children, with give-aways, fast service, and affordable food that is classic kid fare — burgers and fries, with a side order of burgers and fries. "When I take my kids out to eat," said a Boston father of three, "the 16-year-old will be adventurous, but the 11- and eight-year-olds order the same thing whether it's Wendy's or the Ritz: hamburgercolafries."

The Loose Caboose offers hamburgercolafries, with a side order of boxcar verbiage and free engineer hats. Located in a shopping center in Philadelphia (headquarters are in Cherry Hill, NJ), the company currently has one unit with four others being readied for operation along the Eastern seaboard. The Loose Caboose is a combination convenience food mart and fast-food operation, two cabooses joined by a dining car with 30 seats.

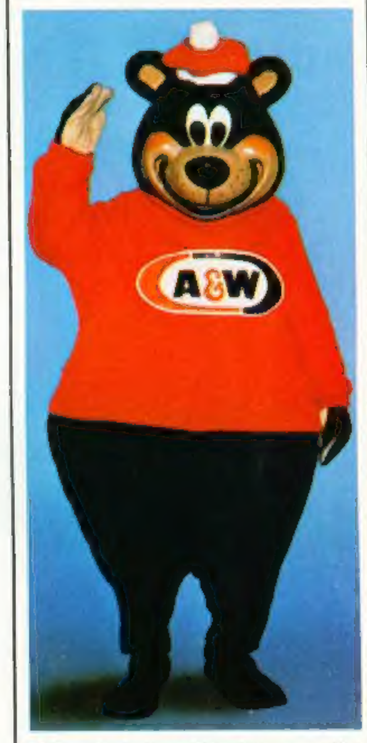
"We have a lot of kids from about eight to about 14 stop in on their own. They'll pick up a hamburger or hot dog before or after school," said Bill Nash, a principal of the Loose Caboose, adding that their location — a free-standing building in a shopping center in a densely populated residential area — helps draw the kids. The type of food they serve also helps, and so do the prices — $.35 for a Box Car Burger, $.35 for a signature item called the "Teenie Weenie".

"The Teenie Weenie is a nice drawing card," said Nash. "It's about half the size of a regular hot dog and bun. Our cost should be about half, but it runs a little higher than that." They also serve larger hot dogs, fried chicken, Chatanooga Chili, milkshakes, and a special four-ounce filet of chicken breast. "Obviously, a lot of that is for the parents," Nash said. "We believe that children bring parents besides coming themselves." Raymond Kavarsky, founder of the Loose Caboose, agrees. "Our prices are lower than any of our competitors," he said, "which should be good news for parents."

Most children seem to be smitten with the railroad bug. Not only do they like the trimmings of the Loose Caboose, but they gravitate toward other similarly decorated operations as well. Victoria Station, with its boxcar seats as well as its salad bar (kids love getting up and creating their own *anything*!), is popular with the small set. Andy's Diner, a Seattle steak stop with a 30-year track record of pleasing both kids and their parents, consists of seven fitted-for-dining railroad cars, including one that FDR used in a presidential campaign. "Kids love the railroad theme," claims Andy Yurkanin, vice president and co-owner of Andy's Diner. And kids are catered to with gentle service, children's menus that fold out to become railroad hats, and replicas of placemats that are actually blow-up plastic pillows. The children's menu, like the Ground Round's, tends to include rather than segregate the children: All of the meat items on it are simply smaller sizes of the same steaks that are served to adults. And like the Ground Round, satisfied children customers tend to show up years later as satisfied adult customers.

But fast-food operations wanting children long before the Loose Caboose were seeing the value in, if not railroad themes, fast service and "kid food" and trademarks of some sort. Goodbye, parent-directed advertising; hello, Ronald McDonald. Chris Schoenleb, executive vice president, director of marketing for Burger King, says of the Magical Burger King: "He talks to kids. He was designed to be fun, to tell kids in as fun a way as he can that the food at Burger King is good." Schoenleb feels the main reason kids like Burger King is that they're served the perennial favorites — hamburgers, cola and fries — and that they don't miss desserts at all.

Jan Perez, manager of sales promotions for A & W, disagrees: She feels kids like desserts, and like A & W partly because of the availability of root beer floats and specialty dessert items. But she



He's soft, he's cuddly, he's appealing to both kids and adults. But don't underestimate the Great Root Bear's marketing potential: He's successfully used in every event from bowling tournaments and parades to unit openings.

thinks they also like the Great Root Bear, a silent, cuddly mascot reminiscent of everybody's childhood. "He crosses the age barrier," said Perez. "Children love him, and for adults he brings back memories of youth." The Bear was developed and introduced to A & W operators at the national convention in 1973, and since that time has been used with success, both here and overseas, for every promotional purpose known to the world: bowling tournaments, parades, tv appearances and fund-raising events. He's also used strictly as a traffic-builder at units, and when he appears at openings he gives out candy or balloons. He is an extension of A & W's marketing effort, and he may have to wait a long, long time for hibernation.

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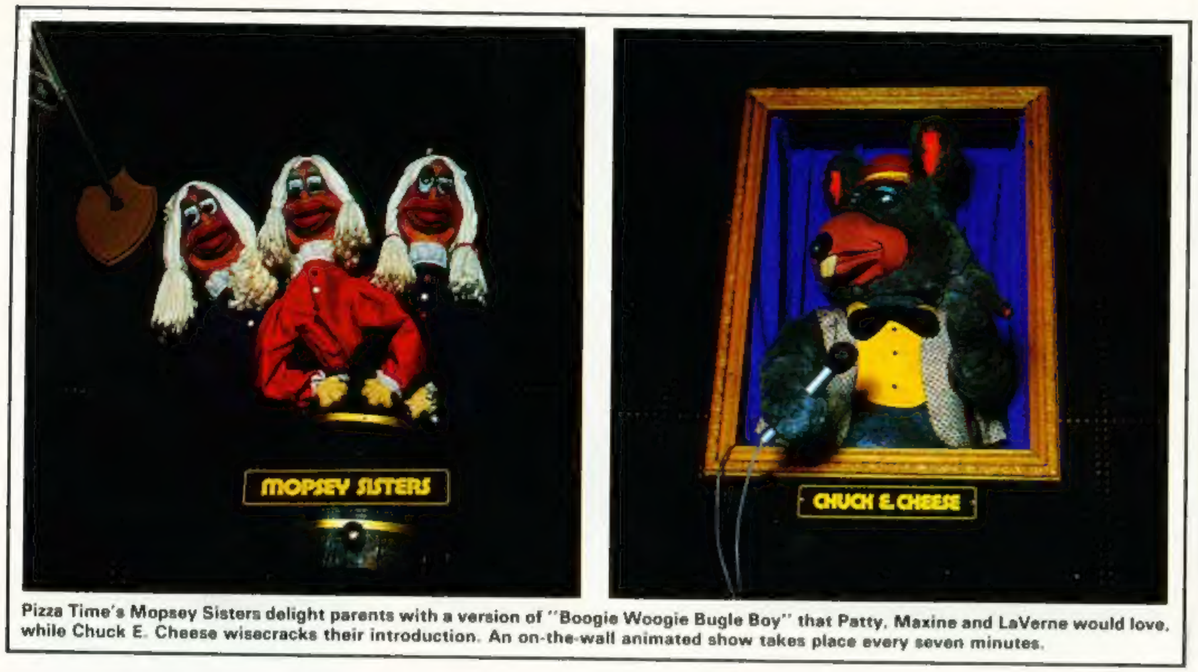

Pizza Time's Mopsey Sisters delight parents with a version of "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" that Patty, Maxine and LaVerne would love, while Chuck E. Cheese wisecracks their introduction. An on-the-wall animated show takes place every seven minutes.

Enter Chuck E. Cheese.

He is grey, a ragamuffin grey, and getting greyer with each small child's hug. He stands a little over five feet tall, has a tail that gets pulled out, a front tooth that gets pulled down and a hat that gets pulled off.

He is a rat, undoubtedly the most loveable rat since Templeton in *Charlotte's Web*. And he is the mascot at Pizza Time Theatre in California, a restaurant that is a full-fledged child's paradise.

"The restaurant is analogous to a Las Vegas hotel," said Gene Landrum, president. "A Vegas hotel has food operations, gaming operations and entertainment operations. And you wouldn't consider doing one without the others."

Pizza Time wouldn't consider it either. As a result, they have combined pizza, sandwiches, dozens of mechanical games, talking animals, mascots, animated pots and pans, songs, show biz and several thousand feet of space into six units that are averaging $1 million year and will expand to a thousand units in five years. A superhuman game plan — all made possible by superhuman games. The originator of the idea is a man named Nolan Bushnell, a pioneer in the video games industry and founder of ATARI. Several years ago he came up with the idea of combining pizza with animated characters, and Pizza Time Theatre was born.

And as it grew it, it grew out. Today there is a separate room called Fantasy Forest Game Preserve, filled with dozens and dozens of electronic games operated with quarters or with the Pizza Time tokens that come with food orders. There's a Jasper T. Jowls General Store selling everything from Chuck E. Cheese stuffed dolls to Jasper Jowls yo-yos, watches, jawbreakers and lollipops. There are walk-around, costumed characters. There is a life-sized, automated hippopotamus called Dolli Dimples, who sits behind a semi-circular bar and sings for the nice people. And in the main dining room, up on the walls, there is Chuck E. Cheese, Mr. Munch, Pasqually the Singing Chef, Jasper T. Jowls, and a host of "guest stars" who put on a singing and talking show — along with animated pots and pans, and waving flags — every seven minutes.

"It's frivolous and frenetic," said Landrum, "and the kids love it. We have the birthday business sewn up." When someone clues in the bartender, he or she announced over the loudspeaker, "It's Mary Jones' sixth birthday — let's have a big cheer from the animals!" The bartender then pushes a button and the animation begins, a wild singing of "Happy Birthday" accompanied by banging drums, clanging pots and pans and waving flags.

While all of this is going on, the pizzas are flying. Style is self-serve, and items available include limited sandwiches, beer, wine, soft drinks, coffee and milk. There is a salad bar which accounts for a thousand salads a week, and an ice-cream sundae bar, which accounts for a thousand smiles of joy: $1.50 buys five ounces of soft-serve ice-cream and all the nuts, sprinkles, fudge and other flavorings you can imagine.

"Our pizza is thin-crust and relatively bland," said Landrum. "You can't have the amount of little kids we have and serve a spicy pizza." But if variety is the spice of pizza, Pizza Time is running hot — pizzas are available with ham, pineapple, almonds, peppers, olives, Italian sausage, Linguica sausage, Canadian-style bacon, salami, anchovies and much more. Prices run from $2.95 for an individual cheese pizza to $8.95 for a large, ultra-elaborate Big C's Combo. Landrum says the average ticket for a family of three is $10.

"That might be more than for other pizza places, but for a family it's not much," he said. "The main thing is that nobody else has what we have — a miniature amusement park. Other pizza parlors have signs saying 'Please Keep Children Seated'. We don't. We encourage kids to get up and run around. And parents can sit and drink their beer or coffee, and everybody has a good time." Landrum and Bushnell also have a good time: Each Pizza Time unit is averaging $1 million a year, with 80 percent coming from food and drink, and 20 percent from games. And with their expansion plans — from 500 to 1,000 units in five years, made possible largely by such franchisees as Topeka Inn Management (TIM), which plans to develop 285 units in 16 states in five years — they, along with Chuck E. Cheese, will be smiling all the way to the imported Camembert.

Because Pizza Time has the formula. Treat the children as something special, give them things that appeal to their energy-filled minds and bodies, but don't neglect Mom and Dad. It's been the formula for a long time, and will be that way even longer; kids are some of the most predictable beings around. They are small, energetic people coming into their own, and deserve to be handled with care. And while catering to them isn't easy, restaurants that are making the attempt are getting the jump on a market that just might provide some needed stability in the upcoming tumultuous decade. □□

In a room adjoining the main dining areas, the Fantasy Forest Game Preserve contains every mechanical game known to captivity — one result of founder Nolan Bushnell's invention of Pong. All games are operated with quarters or with tokens given out with pizza orders.

Sue Thumhart, a woman who works at the Children's Museum in Denver, is responsible for putting together *Boing!*, a newspaper written by kids, for kids. It includes problem-solving columns, articles, and child-written restaurant reviews. From Thumhart, herself a mother, come these kid-catering tips:

"Kids pay attention to how a place makes them feel — are the seats slippery, hot, too high, too low? They generally reject foods that 'feel bad' in their mouths. They generally feel queasy about strange foods, and rebel at 'guts meats' like brains, 'wiggly things' like squid, and 'crawly things' like chocolate grasshoppers. But once they get past those reservations, kids can be little gourmets. My son, Fred, loves escargot!

"Also, no kid worth his or her salt will willingly enjoy a meal associated with a hassle, even if just a fight over the clothes he or she has to wear to go to dinner." □□

CATERING TO KIDS

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